

James 3:3-12
“Teaching on the tongue”

- I. **Intro**
- II. **Vs. 3-4 *The bit and the rudder*: The tongues power to direct**
- III. **Vs. 5-8 *The fire and the beast*: The tongues power to destroy**
- IV. **Vs. 9-12 *The spring and the fruit*: The tongues power to delight**

James’ letter concerns itself with *the spiritual maturity of the believer*. And the third chapter of the letter brings a closer examination of the admonishment to in 1:19 about being “*slow to speak*”. Having covered the specific warning for preachers in the two perils for teachers; James now gives the more general admonishment in verses 3-12 as we discover three truths about the tongue looking at the six-word pictures that are placed into three truths each containing two of the word pictures:

- A. Vs. 3-4 *The bit and the rudder*: The tongues power to direct
- B. Vs. 5-8 *The fire and the beast*: The tongues power to destroy
- C. Vs. 9-12 *The spring and the fruit*: The tongues power to delight

Solomon’s book of wisdom known as Proverbs is packed full of the blessings and pitfalls in our conversations.

Prov. 11:9 “*With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor.*”

Prov. 12:6 “*The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood.*”

Prov. 18:8 “*The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.*”

Prov. 18:21 “*Death and life are in power of the tongue.*”

Prov. 25:15 “*A soft tongue will break a bone.*”

Lives have been elevated and cast down by the tongue. Nations, companies, churches and families have been destroyed by the tongue. That tiny instrument in our body has destroyed more lives as well as blessed more people than any other part of our body.

II. Vs. 3-4 *The bit and the rudder*: The tongues power to direct

Vs. 3-4 The first word pictures James combines are found in verses 3-4 as he describes them as: “*We put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we may turn their whole body.*” And verse 4; “*Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a small rudder wherever the pilot desires.*”

To start with James dispels the myth that was first recorded in 1862 in the Christian Recorder that “*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me.*” The connection James is using is that the “*Sticks and stones*” are the horse’s bit and the ship’s rudder and **words inevitably steer our lives to actions!** Our words and conversation have the power to direct action both in us and in others. Jesus warned of this in Luke 6:45 when He said, “*For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*” During World War II there were posters printed and placed all over America with the warning to all citizens “*Loose Lips Sink Ships!*” When we don’t direct our conversations what we say can cause our bodies to have to defend what our lips said.

The second thing that James uses of this illustration does is to cause the reader to realize how small the bit and rudder are yet can exercise such control over the whole. The length of the bit corresponds to the width of your horse's mouth which averages around 5" or 5 1/2". That little “***bit***” controls an animal that averages 6’ in length and 2000 pounds and can travel at 55 miles per hour. The small bit allows the rider to control the direction of a 2000-pound animal traveling at 55 mph. The bit enables the rider to overcome the contrary forces of the animal and to direct the horse in the proper direction and pace! It has been said that apart from the bit a horse is no service to a man. To be of service the horse needs direction and with the bit it gains not only direction but through it discipline. But the horse cannot bridle itself, this must be done by the rider. One author put it this way, “*Just as a man’s mouth is the test of his character, so the horse’s mouth is the place to control him.*” “*The tongue is like a bridle, which like with a fiery horse we need a curb in our bit so that when we pull against the bit it hurts us before it hurts others.*” A person with an unbridled tongue can serve no purpose to themselves or others.

and most importantly their Lord. The Greek use of this illustration goes beyond just the idea of just “restraining a person” to leading and directing a person. It is never enough to stop us from doing harm as the goal of Jesus is to cause us to be directed by our speech to be a blessing.

Though horses were far more known to James’ readers they weren’t ignorant of ships either. James adds analogy of the ship to point two more truths about our mouths: First James says, “***although they are so large***” and the context is **not on the mouth** or rudder but rather what it controls the ship which when compared to the rudder is enormous in size. The size of the rudder is on an average 2-10% of the underwater hull depending on the speed and type of hull. The second point James illustrates is that the opposition against the rudder are far greater than with the horse as he says that ships are “driven by fierce winds”. Ships have to overcome winds and currents that without a rudder would naturally be the navigation of the ship. We all face the currents of our old nature and sin as well as the winds of the world that both desire to blow us off course and sink us if we don’t allow the Lord to pilot our ships through the control of the rudder of our mouths. It takes the strong hand of Jesus in both illustrations to keep us on course, so we don’t say the wrong things or the right things the wrong way. If Jesus is the Lord of our lives then He is the Lord of our lips as well! The bit and the rudder of the ability to direct and when we allow the Lord to have control we will never be a runaway horse or a shipwreck!

III. Vs. 5-8 *The fire and the beast: The tongues power to destroy*

Vs. 5-8 The second set of illustrations James uses are found here in verses 5-8 with the tongue being equated to a fire in verse 5-6 and a beast in verses 7-8. These two

illustrations are to emphasize the power that our conversation has to destroy and how little it takes for it to rage out of control. We live in fire country and almost every year we see how a spark can set our mountains on fire. James says that, *“the tongue is a little member and **boasts great things**”*. The link with the destructive nature of the tongue with its *“**boasting**”* is vital to understand the source of why it becomes so dangerous. ***In a word it’s the arrogance and haughtiness of the heart that fans its flames.*** Paul warned of this to the believers in Rome when he wrote in Romans 12:3 *“For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.”* The outcome of not doing so is stated, *“See how great a forest a little fire kindles!”* Every year this illustration is seen; my grandparents old house along 11,000 other homes and 85 lives all destroyed in Paradise California. The “Camp Fire” destroyed 19,000 structures did 2 billion dollars of damage, displaced 50,000 people and reduced the population of the town from 26,000 to 3,000. That destructive nature of the tongue has claimed far more lives and split up far more communities than even this fire. Proverbs 26:20-21 reminds us that *“Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.”* The tongue can *“heat things up”* stirring up the coals. Furthermore, James says that such unbridled tongue is used by satan as it *“sets on fire the course of nature; and it is **SET ON FIRE BY HELL.**”* I believe that there are four similarities with fires and our uncontrolled tongues:

1. **Both start small and grow:** Fire creates heat that defiles what it touches. Even that which is not torched directly is ruined by the smoke! There is residual damage even when the fire doesn’t burn directly as it can taint how we view those it burned.

2. **Both burn and hurt all that it touches**: There is nothing so hurtful at times than people's words and comments. Jesus heard such words about Himself while we walked the roads of Israel. He was called gluttonous and a winebibber, when he performed miracles to heal others they said he did so by Satan's power. When he was on the cross for the sin of humanity they tainted Him and mocked Him.
3. **Both spread the more fuel you feed it**: The more fuel you give it the faster and further it travels even if you weren't the spark that started it. A person's life and reputation can be destroyed that even time cannot reverse. Just because something is "true" about another person doesn't qualify our spreading the story to others. The only person we should talk too about others is God.
4. **Both destroy more as they spread**: The words we speak and write have the power to destroy lives. For every word in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) 125 lives were lost. Words have caused wars and destroyed lives, broken hearts and ruined reputations. We need to make sure that as followers of Jesus we do as Paul admonished in Col 4:6 to let our speech "be always full of grace, seasoned with salt."

James connects the first with verse 7-8 and "*every beast*" bird, reptile and creature in the sea. The link has to do with how humanity has been able to tame these wild animals but has never been able to master their own tongues. The point of James is to show that without the help of God we cannot control our tongues. When a person harnesses "***fire***" they end up with "***power***"! When a person "***tames***" an animal they have a "***worker***" instead of a destroyer! At Babylon when the tongue was loosed it cursed God and praised their own self worship and the only thing that could save humanity was its confusion. But when God controlled the tongue at Pentecost the words praised God and 3000 souls were added and escaped the fires of hell. Saints the difference is that, ***Satan lights his fire with lies and hate, God lights His fires with truth and love, so what kindles your speech?***

IV.Vs. 9-12 The spring and the fruit: The tongues power to delight

Vs. 9-12 James concludes these illustrations with an observation of the inconsistency of our conversation. We "bless God" and then turn around and "curse men" who have been in the likeness of God. Both blessings and cursing's coming from the same fount. The source of water can bring refreshment and blessings to a parched soul, it can clean,

enable things to grow and a host of other blessings to humanity. There three things that water and the right words have in common:

1. **Both are life giving**: Or words can be used to bring forth life however we have all witnessed the destructive nature of water as well when it is not controlled.
2. **Both are refreshing**: A cool drink of water refreshes, we need water and cannot live more than 3 days without it. Paul said that he was refreshed by the saints because of their words.
3. **Both can cleanse**: In the Old testament tabernacle water was used to cleanse the priest's hands and instruments as well as the sacrifice. The bible speaks of being cleansed by the washing of the word of God.

James further explains that it is the source of the spring that determines the usefulness of the water and that it doesn't matter what a person says is the source of their words we will be able to see what the source is buy what it produces in those it touches. The final pairing with water is that fruit and the truth is the type of fruit will always determine the tree! The most important part of a tree is its root system and as such we all ought to be rooted and grounded in love. If our tongue is inconsistent with our profession then we know something is wrong with us. If the fruit is different than they type of tree we say we are than we aren't the tree we claim to be. Such a strong admonishment ought to leave the reader of this passage evaluating their own hearts to see where we truly are so that God can cleanse our hearts and take control of our mouths!